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Grim tales: Meetings, matterings and moments of silencing and frustration in everyday academic life

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Abstract

Universities are dominated by marketisation, individualisation and competition, forces inimical to individual flourishing and collaborative endeavours. This article presents four stories from a collective biography workshop in which a group of women academics explored everyday moments in their university lives. The stories are grim tales of damage, silencing, frustration and cynicism, whose affects continue to reverberate. The article makes two contributions to higher education research. One, its focus on mundane moments offers insights into embodied dynamics of gender, power and affect within the neoliberal university. Two, it demonstrates how collective biography as a feminist methodology can mobilise increased awareness of shared experiences and, thereby, enable participants to work together to recognise and contest the affective grimness of their workplaces.

Keywords: collective biography, power, academia, gender, affect

Academic life in neoliberal times

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The impact of neoliberal economic processes on university working practices has been documented across the globe (Ball 2016; Bottrell & Manathunga 2019; Brown 2015; David 2014; Davies & Bansel, 2010; Lorenz 2012; Taylor & Lahad, 2018). These insights are often about macro changes influencing institutional academic principles and practices. This paper, in contrast, explores the micro practices in day to day life as they impact on a group of women academics involved in collective biography research (Davies & Gannon, 2006, 2012). It presents some of the 'small stories' – affective and embodied moments of conflicts with power – from ordinary working days in academia. Their focus on micropolitical practices tells of how power is resisted or refused and how individuals constitute themselves in relation to/with neoliberal power (Ball, 2016). Morley (2016) offers a feminist examination of micro-level impact of neoliberal discourse on research activities in universities paying particular attention to how these discourses are materialized in the relations between time, space, people and objects. Academics enact agency through constant negotiations of situations involving people, things and materialities. Turning to the bodily and psycho/affective impact of these practices, many scholars have highlighted the resultant anxiety, stress and debilitating effects of these toxic times on academic subjects (Berg, Huijbens & Gutzon Larsen 2016; Gill 2010; Taylor & Lahad 2018; Taylor et al., 2021). According to Gill and Donaghue (2016, p. 91), the increased stress, exhaustion and associated illnesses associated with individualistic and competitive neoliberalism have produced a 'psychosocial and somatic catastrophe' for university workers. Calls for collective resistance are emerging from diverse directions. Mountz et al. (2015) highlight the need for a 'collective feminist ethics of care' and a move to 'slow scholarship' that might counter the acceleration of neoliberal academia. Darder (2019) argues that 'it is only through collective action that the oppressive system of the university – *subject to fatigue, to cracks* – can be effectively dismantled and justly reinvented' (ix). Inspired by these authors, amongst others, we have worked collectively into

these institutional ‘cracks’ by critically and collectively examining memories of our embodied experiences in academia. We examine some of the everyday ‘intra-actions’ where we are affected by, and act upon, the neoliberalist university culture: that is, the intra-actions of people, place, objects and affects. The small stories provide insights into larger ones of resistance, negotiation and capitulation.

Beginning somewhere: the snap

Collective biography is a methodology that invites groups of scholars to come together to investigate a topic of mutual interest. Memories of lived experience pertaining to the agreed theme are shared, interrogated, written and rewritten to move beyond habitual, generalised or cliched accounts towards detailed, intimate, material, resonant moments, where we begin to see the entangled discursive, material, affective threads through which a story comes to make sense – and how it might be understood otherwise (Davies & Gannon 2006). These rewritings are significant in two respects: in effecting a move from the individual to the collective in that the processes of collective biography entails ‘working with intensities and flows that, collectively, move us’ (Davies & Gannon 2012, p. 360); and in enabling an attention to the personal as political which is a core feature of feminist methodology.

At the time of the workshop the participants were all associated with one university in the north of England, and variously located in relation to that institution: as PhD student, casual or full time tutor, administrator, Professor, visiting scholar. However, amongst the 12 workshop participants and the 8 who agreed to continue the work of writing together after the workshop, we have had experiences as students and academic workers across many institutions in the UK and Australia, and the stories in this paper should not be assumed to be

drawn from a single site. Amongst the authors of this paper, we are variously privileged and marginalised: our differences in terms of gender, social class, age and dis/ability intersect in complex ways with racialisation and we are undoubtedly advantaged by our whiteness in the historically white UK institutions in which the research took place. Participants responded to an advertisement for a two day workshop to explore being-becoming academic and doing academic work in the contemporary university.

Although we also found fleeting moments of joy (Gannon et al. 2019), meetings figured heavily in our memories and were suffused with negative affect – grim tales of power, subjugation and complicity. Details of/from meetings were recalled, remembered, and reviewed as we pondered, alone and together, the vital work meetings did in governing our minds and bodies. Meetings, it seemed, offered ways of creating small, often private spaces, for enacting hurts, punishments, and slights which form a routine undercurrent in academic life-as-usual for many of us, but which are often brushed off and brushed away in order to continue with the daily work, deal with the demands, and get through the grind of being an academic in performative university contexts. In these contexts, relationality is subordinated (if not entirely sacrificed) to outcomes, measures and targets. This article focuses on grim tales which tell of the mundane ordinariness of meetings between members of staff in which some minor damage is done, and in which specific and cumulative damages change one's sense of self as an academic worker. As Ahmed (2010) reminds us, affects are inherently 'sticky'. The negative perceptions that are generated and the feelings that arise in such affectively 'sticky' moments shift our sense of self, purpose and place. The damage sticks: it is taken on by our bodies, taken up by our senses, and taken into our shifting academic subjectivities, as we sense that the value of our work is disputed or denigrated, or simply ignored.

These grim tales happen in a minor key in routine meetings which constitute the everyday work of the university. There is nothing extraordinary here except that such meetings *matter* because they materialize a felt sense of not mattering, of not being taken into account, listened to, or heard. Such minor, mundane events are, in our stories, entangled with meetings as occasions and spaces in which the broader performative purposes of the university seem to become intimately – yet loudly – apparent. The meetings produced matterings that were bodily felt and affectively apprehended; meetings whose moments of stickiness and snap became 'capillary' (Foucault, 1980), suggesting power that reaches deeply into an individual, making them *who* they are. Meeting rooms, our stories suggest, are small spaces in which power flows become written on the body, manifest in behaviours and attitudes. They shape our bodies and feelings, impact on our capacities to manage and perform our roles, organise our careers, and perhaps even influence our destinies.

When meetings emerged through the collective biography process they seemed to cohere around moments of what Ahmed (2017) calls 'feminist snap'. For Ahmed, the snap has the quality of a 'crisp, sharp, cracking … breaking suddenly giving] way abruptly under pressure or tension' (2017, p. 188). A snap is a starting point that is 'the unbecoming of something' (ibid). At a deep level, in remembering, thinking, talking and writing about meetings and the mundane matterings they produced, we felt we had tapped into the sort of 'snap' which Ahmed (2017) speaks of as a realisation that something is being broken, or has broken, that it is damaged, injured, under pressure. The snap, in this conception, is a momentary sensation but it is also 'sticky' – it brings into its orbit past and future, it produces material effects and affects which travel. This is what our stories sensed and our grim tales tune into: how 'something' was indelibly written on/into our bodies-minds-hearts in that meeting and how

that ‘something’ became woven into our ongoing institutional lives. Such snaps are difficult to grasp in words, they go beyond language to an affective sensation which Stewart (2007, p. 19) describes as ‘an unnamed condensation of thought and feeling’. We were motivated by Ahmed’s notion of the snap to explore the events that happened in particular meetings to consider what these meetings disclose about the psychic and very real life of power in institutions, to examine how affects circulate and take hold in intimate, bodily and felt matterings, and to recognise the pressures and strains, and resources and resiliencies, required to (continue to) ‘be’ academics in the present moment.

Meetings in rooms: the place of organisation

When people meet together to do institutional tasks, they organise and constitute the meeting space as a particular place of social relations. Recent analyses of academic feelings in universities have touched only fleetingly on meetings. Shipley (2018, p. 21), for example, notes exclusion from meetings as indicative of the ‘partial’ academic worker; Murray (2018) speaks of the affective violence of meetings; and Breeze (2018, p. 210) of the performative demands of staff meetings. However, apart from Ahmed’s (2014) analysis of ‘diversity work’ in universities, we have found little detailed analysis of the intricate flows of power and privilege inside meetings. Rather than large quasi-public meetings, those in our stories are more intimate, and often take place in spaces that are not official meeting rooms. Dale and Burrell (2008, p. 3) recognise that ‘the interwoven nature of organisation, space and architecture profoundly affects our everyday lives, although we may rarely notice this’, noting that ‘organised spaces are at once intensely personal and intensely political: they are material, social and imaginary” (ibid). The events and encounters we discussed and wrote about were routine occurrences in institutional life: an appraisal, a staff feedback event, a job

evaluation discussion, i.e. the usual, mundane day-to-day activities that occur in academia, not the writing of articles, the learning and teaching, grant applications, course revalidations, or graduations. Not the 'high points' but rather the 'low points' which attend the going-on-ness of what has to happen to ensure that things get done, boxes ticked, list items crossed off. Perec (1997, p. 210) classified such mundane, ordinary and routine events as the 'infra-ordinary' and wondered why we are attracted to the exceptional and exotic, rather than the mundane and the everyday:

> What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary: the front-page splash, the banner headlines. Railway trains only begin to exist when they are derailed, and the more passengers that are killed, the more the trains exist… How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs everyday: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual?

Taking a cue from Perec, we focus on the ordinary 'background noise' to bring into focus the hurts which happen as part of the routine power of meetings in our everyday academic lives.

Meeting rooms: institutional non-places and spaces

Can places as boring and banal as institutional meeting rooms have such impact over time and space, so that the visceral 'feel' of what happened in them remains within us, with the affective intensities of slights waiting to return to the surface? Our collection of grim tales suggest that they do. The meeting rooms we write of were sometimes a species, a type of space, like airport waiting lounges, car parks, doctors' waiting rooms, and corridors, rooms

deliberately designed as institutional non-places, Auge's (1992) phrase for those contemporary spaces which erase the relational, historical and identity markers which help turn abstract spaces into places. Non-places emphasise contractuality and anonymity, their walls bear instructions, they absolve the inhabitant of engagement with their design and architecture, they are designed to process your body through them in the 'now' of the present rather than invite you to linger in them and let comfort or memory do its work. The meeting rooms we write of also included other people's rooms usually by virtue of their role which meant they had the power to choose their room, their space, or a power which was manifest by not having to share it with anyone else. Owned rooms bear the identity marks of their owners, in the arrangement of furniture, things on the wall, floor and desk, temperature, and ambience. Entering and being in others' rooms requires negotiation, tacit recognition, embodied and unspoken codes of being and doing of space which establish relations, codes of authority, and flows of power.

In some cases, the rooms were our own, turned temporarily into meeting places, colonised by and with others in order to attend to a particular institutional task. Of course, others' and our own rooms are also species of non-places because they too are 'borrowed' institutional spaces, temporarily owned and claimed by particular people for a particular length of time. In this way, non-places continually fold back into, emerge from and become places in institutions, and vice versa. Space and place form fluctuating, multiple and heterogeneous fields of encounter for human inhabitants: material, affective, social (Massey, 2005). While bearing some marks of non-spaces, the meetings that gave rise to our grim tales coalesce their own particularities, and the meeting rooms *as rooms* were active in constituting the particular events, doings, and happenings which occurred within them in the everyday battleground of academic life.

Writing-together and writing about

As a means to investigate the infra-ordinary, Perec sat in a café in Place Saint-Sulpice, Paris, and, over a three-day period in October 1974, wrote systematically about what he saw from the café window. He published his 'results' in his short book *An Attempt to Exhaust a Place in Paris*. Our approach was different: we chose the methodology of collective biography to explore our experiences of the academic infra-ordinary.

The opportunity to experiment with collective biography for interrogating lived experience in academia arose when Susanne Gannon (Davies & Gannon, 2006, 2012) visited the UK university and co-convened a workshop that drew on themes that emerged in her recent work with other collectives (Charteris, Gannon, Mayes, Nye & Stephenson, 2016; Gannon et al., 2015; Gannon, Powell, & Power, 2018). Over the course of two days the 12 participants engaged in a range of storying techniques, drawing on memories, objects and images. The workshop invitation stressed that participants should be prepared to share their stories and engage with each other's stories of the embodied, affective and relational labour of working in the university. Collective biography methodology was deployed as a means to generate precise vignettes of experience that evoke mundane yet potent moments of everyday life in the university. Together we agreed to collaboratively investigate the infra-ordinary 'academicity,' or how one comes to "know how to act, speak, think, being, come into existence' as an academic or how one acquires 'academichood'" (Petersen, 2007, p. 477).

During the workshop, we shared stories about moments in our academic lives, then wrote these as stories; we took photos and wrote stories about them; and we also extended the

disruptive potential of the methodology by using each other's photos to take a line of flight to write further stories, provoking shifts beyond the singularities of the speaking/writing subject (Gannon, Walsh, Byers, & Rajiva, 2012). In the collective storying space of the workshop, we spoke our stories out loud, wrote them, read our drafts out to the group, reflected on them, had feedback from others who were listening to them, and rewrote them. Likewise, we listened to, heard and commented on others' stories. This collaborative engagement with our own and others' stories helped our stories take shape, deepen, develop, and unfurl further in the workshop space. All stories were uploaded to a shared dropbox and, from that point, these stories constituted the data from which this article has been developed. This sharing, reading, listening, writing together contributed to the feeling of snap as we were reminded that storied moments were more than our own private hurts, they were patterned throughout the academy. As we continued to work with the stories analytically, the conceptual resources that we worked with also expanded which each of us weaving in and weaving together our thinking.

The subjects in our stories move from the individual attached to, and possessive of, her 'own' story to stories as collective productions of multiple academic subjects. In this shift from the personal to the collective mode of composition, the stories engaged each of us with different professional roles and subjectivities, and we found ourselves recast in the stories as different kinds of people, or ascribed with alternative intentions. The stories, therefore, do not offer singular truths of individual lives, attached to particular individual subjects, but rather offer a *collective* biography composed of re-worked and re-written memory stories which examine the ways in which subjects become recognizable and knowable (or not) as 'academic' through moments that were simultaneously discursive, affective, and materially constituted. Such moments are inherently unstable, nevertheless this instability held us captive as we attempted to account for multiple reimaginings of academic memories which enabled

different details and variations of tone and motif to emerge. Their vignette-like textures resemble the fleeting and transitory narratives found in everyday conversation. Their specificity is suggestive of how, another time, even with the same participants, different memories may have arisen and the grim tales produced would have differed. Thus, the stories we wrote and the tales they were shaped into and present here are not about any essential or absolute sense of academic life, but rather seek to tell of the ways in which academic life is pieced together as if it makes sense.

All of this, then, indicates that collective biography is not a traditional method of collecting data 'about' something, which is then 'analysed', themed, coded and written up. Collective biography proceeds differently: by telling, sharing, writing stories, then crafting those stories, looking for resonances which emerge from and amongst them, by selecting particular stories for inclusion, or making decisions to leave other stories out. In our case, once we had discussed and made choices regarding story and resonating themes, the writing of the article was then also undertaken collaboratively. In practical terms, then, this article emerged from writing 'go-arounds' – it was passed around the authoring circle (author sequence and timing agreed in advance) so that each author could add their writing into the emerging analysis. Crucially, we agreed in advance that each author could write over, amend, and write into the what previous authors had written, thereby removing the attachment to, and ownership of, word and story by particular authors. We stopped asking: whose story is this? Who has written this particular sentence? It doesn't matter 'who' because we **all** have. In writing this paper, our collective biography method continues into an enactment of collaborative authorship.

Located in a feminist ethic of care, collective biography figures ethics as situational and engaged. Because we are working with self-storying processes, there was no requirement in

our institutions to complete forms for institutional ethical approval, yet we attended to ethics at every step of the way. Ethics as response and response-ability infused our listening, our hearing, our feedback, our care in talking of others' stories, our attentiveness to nurturing and handling those stories as we wrote about them. Our ethical practices were, throughout the whole process, informed by Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) notion of ethically important moments, that is, we sought to adhere to a praxis of ethics-in-action which attends to those mundane and often fleeting events which matter and which need to be responded to relationally – with tact, patience, and responsibility. In addition, discussions of authorship were threaded throughout, checking back, questioning and reviewing agreements as we wrote together. This, too, was central to our feminist ethics. We were explicit about freedom to withdraw our participation at any stage of the process and to withdraw our stories up to the point of their selection for further work.

The grim tales which follow indicate where this collaborative storying process led us. Our stories about the mundane matterings of meetings in academia are presented and resonances are drawn out from them, resonances suggestive of the gendered dynamics of working in the university and the embodied, affective and relational labour this entails. In the spirit of collective biography, the following sections are not a thematic analysis but are, rather, points of collective musing on meeting rooms and meetings in rooms. As such, they take forward work on how material moments matter (Taylor, 2013, 2018).

Story 1: The ritual of annual appraisal

> *A small, hot room and a sunny day in June several years ago. I was well-prepared and felt optimistic, calm and composed. After the hellos and smiles, he talks about*

himself for what seems like ages while I listen politely. I take the first opportunity I can to intervene and try to turn the conversation to me. And so the annual appraisal ritual begins. I have always taken it seriously, using it as time for me to take stock, consider, think, a moment to stop and, yes, appraise – the usual questions, what went well, not so well, what didn't 'go' at all? What do I want to focus on next year? A time to wind the past into the future, enabling my passions (research, pedagogic and otherwise) to cohere and become apparent on paper, and then (perhaps) in the real of the year to come. Perhaps I've been lucky in the past in that the managers I've met with have actually been interested in what I had to say during appraisal. This time it's different. It is hard to get the conversation onto me and my doings at work over the past year. I try to focus on specifics, pulling particular instances out from what I wrote on the appraisal form into the talk, but my cues pass into the air and are not taken up by him, and so the conversation turns back again to departmental goals and what his priorities are over the coming year. He doesn't say if or how I figure in these, so I offer some concrete things I could do. These are welcomed but not elaborated upon. The conversation feels like it has elongated into a series of false starts on my part – gambits, openings, and throwings out – which become stranded like jellyfish on a beach, or worse, like actual jelly thrown at a wall and sliding sadly to the floor. How unexpected this is. What is odd is that during this too he tells me that I am doing a great job, that I am appreciated, that people speak highly of me. I am warmed by these words which sound genuine. And yet, the conversation goes on, me continuing to work into words what I had written on my appraisal form, and him buffering and punting those words into the long grass. And yet, amongst this too, we joke and banter and josh with each other – saying things in this small, and overly hot room that we both know are inappropriate and will not be repeated in public. I see

him surreptitiously glancing at his watch and my enthusiasm for this charade wanes. I decide to end the appraisal before he does. We part on jovial terms. I tell him I will email the form to him for him to complete his section. This year's appraisal has become just one more administrative chore to be ticked off my list. I send the form to him. He doesn't reply. Weeks later, I send it again. He doesn't respond. I send it a third time. Again, no response. The form hangs in my folder, unfinished, incomplete, a loose end dangling.

The encounter narrated here is an entangled mix of gendered and institutional performatives: doing good female employee as embodied emotional labour; doing male manager via a superficial 'mateyness'; the rhetorical routines of the conversation; the institutional requirement for an annual ritual of appraisal; the actuality of the appraisal undone – rendered null and void, valueless and empty; the manager's non-compliance with institutional procedures. It raises a complex swirl of emotions and affects. It is a private meeting, in that only the manager and worker are present. No other witnesses, only the documentation – the appraisal form – which is institutionally intended to serve as witness to academic labour undertaken throughout the year but is ultimately overlooked, as is the academic who is the focus and narrator of the event.

In this account, the storyteller constructs a compliant, diligent, thoughtful employee identity. She has come to the meeting 'well-prepared', having completed the institutional appraisal form, she takes the process seriously, '*using it as time for me to take stock, consider, think'* and she is clearly eager to talk about her work. A 'committed academic' identity is presented in her mention of research and pedagogy and this is heightened beyond the realm of job or duty by her referring to these as 'passions'. This identity is partially ratified by praise from

manager: '*he tells me that I am doing a great job, that I am appreciated, that people speak highly of me. I am warmed by these words which sound genuine'.* However, this praise is general and the specifics which will enable her to explain what is important to her are ignored and she remains merely generically good – unsharpened, her detail and specificity unseen. He blurs and dilutes her, as he focuses on the department and himself and the only real point of engagement is jovial banter in which institutional roles do not feature. As she recedes into the background, and disappears into the walls of his small hot room, her identity becomes a cipher for his plays of gendered power, evidenced in his right to re-direct the conversation away from the meeting's purpose and towards what matters to him – the department goals – because this is what he (and not she) finds valuable. The appraisal form, which should have functioned as a site of verification – a concrete record of her work and achievement – is ignored, discarded and nullified. Her identity is officially unverified, unrecorded.

The appraisal 'ritual' turns into an unexpected conversational struggle (the purpose of the meeting and the writer's attempt to get the talk on to '*me and my doings*' are, after all, aligned) won by the manager who steers and dominates the conversation. Despite the institutional requirement for this annual appraisal meeting, the writer's attempt to fulfil this obligation passes into the air, gets stranded, slides to the floor, is buffered and is punted into the long grass – a golfing metaphor which gestures towards masculinised hierarchies of power at work. It is his priorities, not hers, that matter in this particular meeting room. Here, there is no room for her to talk about herself, even though this is what the meeting is for. Instead, there is his talk of him, his department, his priorities, a language of ownership and control into which josh, joke and banter are conversationally inserted, along with occasional instances of private, 'inappropriate' talk. There are moments of affirmation, even moments of warmth, but what matters in this meeting is the enactment of gendered power in its sticky

asymmetry. This speaker's sense of snap coheres as a felt sense of lassitude as something that mattered (her 'passions') decomposes into an empty institutional duty, and the manager sneaks a look at his watch, an injurious sense of disregard affectively felt.

Story 2: The corporate consultation

> *I feel my body slumped in the chair - my shoulders forward - but my stomach tense, uncomfortable. At a meeting my better instincts told me to decline. Supposedly for feedback from us, the participants, the meeting has been dominated by the people who called it. Telling not listening, telling not asking. My stomach hurts. The room is a bland grey meeting room, pale grey chairs around an oblong plastic table. I listen and switch off, listen and switch off, the words in the language of corporate speak, positive psychology and blue sky cliché. I am worried about the long list of things I have to do before I can go home today, covering for staff who have left and not been replaced, adding more and more to my expanding diary. I feel a headache starting and rub my brow. One of the organisers is talking about how we need some creative space in the faculty where staff could meet and exchange ideas, no-one else is talking, no-one else moves, this space feels stifling and I feel irritated. I speak. I suggest first we need to give staff some time and not workload people to over 100% as a matter of course. The atmosphere palpably changes, people turn to look at me, people cross their legs, the organisers faces change: one freezes, eyebrows just very slightly raised, the other turns towards me with curled lips and a deep frown. Air moves and circulates for the first time in the room, something is broken, something has momentarily shattered and shifted - just a tiny fraction before the organisers pull it back with smiles and turn away from me. I look down at the surface of the table and*

notice a piece of glue. I rub my finger over it and gently peel it off. The room is still again, they carry on talking, carry on smiling. I plan what I have to do first when I get back to the office.

Another story of being silenced. The meeting is being held ostensibly to give voice to meeting participants but again is dominated by managers who are '*telling, not listening, telling not asking*', a description that is weighted with frustration and cynicism. Unlike the previous story, however, this grim tale has no moments of light and is shot through with pain, both physical (stomach tense, uncomfortable; stomach hurts; a headache; stifling) and emotional (worried; irritated). The mood and accoutrements of the room are grey, bland, plastic, and there is no sense of authenticity around the people who have called the meeting. Rather, the room seems paralysed under the wash of meaningless corporate jargon, no-one talks and no one moves, and there seems to be no purpose and nothing to be gained or achieved.

A disruption happens when the writer decides to speak. Her voice fractures the atmosphere – something is broken, is shattered, shifts. This moment brings relief and air. This tiny snap, however, is short lived. The embodied responses that are evoked are hardly encouraging – legs crossing, frowning, raised eyebrows. The managers reclaim the floor. The writer returns to her internal voice and to worrying about the work she needs to get done, and the pointlessness of the meeting. Her frustration persists.

In this story, the writer pushes against management discourse, revealing, for a second, a purposeless sham. She shows, for a moment, the absurdity of talking about 'creative spaces' in the face of the reality of impossible workloads. She reveals a room full of people biding

their precious time until they can return to work, performing compliant employee by their presence, waiting until the managers stop speaking. Real problems are not addressed, the writer is ignored, the managers have the last say.

Story 3: The cutting edge of teaching and learning

> *So we sat in my office and I explained. I showed how it took 5 clicks and a log in to access an electronic activity that had taken a teacher over an hour to make. I said that this would take 5 minutes to make on paper and less than a minute to give out in the class. I said all the teachers agree. It's weird to have everything online if we are in the same room as the students. 'Ahh', he says. 'I see', and 'yes'. 'You're right, you're right'. Relief that common sense prevails. Later, he says (not to me) 'resistant to change'. A crime in this institution at the cutting edge of teaching and learning. Unforgivable in this institution preparing digital natives for 21st century work. An offence in this institution which increases student motivation and attainment through digital technologies. 'Resistant to change'. Three powerful words, now ascribed to me.*

This story goes beyond silencing and reveals a glimpse of how the power play continues beyond the meeting. The writer's plea for 'common sense' seems at first to be listened to and agreed with and she feels a sense of relief. However, like the previous story, the moment of relief is fleeting. She is later not only silenced, but also misrepresented. She is given a label which, easily ascribed yet difficult to deny, goes against the favoured and prioritised institutional discourse. It is interesting that while in her space, the male manager agrees with her. Later, in his own space, he encloses her, labels her, and pushes her into the recesses. His

voice dominates and prevails; his term for her circulates in institutional discourse; she is silenced and punished for challenging management discourses and decisions. Hierarchies and the practices they impose on teaching staff are maintained, despite being illogical, unnecessary and difficult.

Like the previous story, this story is shot through with cynicism. The writer is fully aware of the move to enact punishment that her male manager has made, fully aware of the damage she has done to herself in challenging management discourse, and fully aware of the futility of contesting management decisions.

Story 4: Being heard

> *My University requires us to complete a long-detailed form when requesting a job change/re-evaluation and/or a pay increase. After completing it we're invited to a meeting with our senior manager. I had mine this time last year and took my line manager – Anna – with me. Ian's office is a triangular space at the end of a short corridor. It requires you to sit with your back to the door. Ian sits opposite, alongside his desk rather than behind it. He is not an intimidating man. We've spoken before on a range of subjects dear to our hearts – art, photography, education, writing. But today he has his line manager's hat on and I can't penetrate the management speak on show. My words seem to be missing the mark, like rubber bullets bounding off a wall they came back at me. He is answering different questions to the ones I'm asking. How odd.*

Anna can see I'm frustrated. Quiet, unobtrusive tears start to roll down my cheeks. My voice remains the same, and the tears are not a problem, they're like a cough or a sneeze, something that has to come out. But the real issue is I feel I'm not being heard. Not being understood. At one point Anna says, are you hearing Ian say no to your request? I say, yes I am. He said 'No'. I think he might not agree, she replies. Ian did you say no? He looks genuinely shocked. I didn't, he replies. I said maybe, I said I get what you're saying, I said let's look at it again in 6 months.

Something had happened to language. Something had happened to meaning. Eventually we leave the office. I talk to Anna about not being heard or understood. I am angry and upset. I go home and think some more. Somewhere around 3 am I wake up and I am very clear. At 3 am I revisited the space where conflict had taken place- I went back to Ian's office in my head. I recognised the rhizomic nature of that conflict. I saw how meaning might be made, unmade and re made. Ian said my door is always open to you. So later on I'm going to go in to work and try that door and sit down and say what I really want to say. I get 15 minutes with him. He is changed. He agrees we should go ahead very quickly with putting my request into place.

Like Story 1, this story features a woman in a conversational struggle with a male line manager. This time, however, the stakes are arguably higher (job change/pay increase) and the tone more formal. Like the encounters in the previous stories, the writer is not heard – her words miss the target and bounce back at her and her questions go unanswered. In this story there is a contrast between the manager as an unintimidating colleague the writer can talk to, and the man in his 'manager's hat' talking in 'management speak'. Although the writer tries hard to communicate, there seems to be a wall which neither interactant can navigate –

language and meaning are rendered useless, he doesn't hear her, and she doesn't understand him. She fails to convince him and her only means of expression is tears – 'something has to come out'. It could be argued that this is her moment of 'snap', when she realises that her words are not being heard and her questions go unanswered but perhaps this invalidation is just more pressure before the moment of 'snap' which actually comes later; at 3am when she relives the conversation and she has the realisation of how 'meaning might be made, unmade and re made'. This is the moment that her feelings of invalidation, reject and helplessness break and transform into resolve to try again, to make him listen.

In this story the frustration of being unable to speak and be heard shifts and is resolved. The writer has a chance to re-do the meeting and manages to carve out a space to be heard. The cynicism of the previous two stories is absent as, in the end, she gets what she wants. However, the effort needed to get heard is huge, and the cost, perhaps, is humiliation.

Discussion

Power and gender

Reading the stories again, we are struck by the overwhelming feeling of power relations between female staff members and their male managers. These stories are grim tales of the work that is done in forming and reforming identities, of negotiations/collisions between different staff roles, of the desire to be heard and recognized, and how this desire is frustrated, negated and marginalized. Men in these stories hi-jack meetings set up for a particular purpose (e.g. appraisal, staff feedback) for their own purposes, and it is men's agendas that are prioritised and men's views which prevail. This gives rise to frustration at not being heard, to anger that is never expressed verbally, but seeps out in tears (story 4), in the words being 'thrown' out like the jelly thrown at a wall (story 1), or the words like rubber

bullets bouncing off a wall (story 4). Women try to be heard but are mostly overpowered as men win conversational struggles, make decisions, and in all stories but the final one, have the last word. The success of the final story is bittersweet, however, at the expense of tears, frustration, thought, and time.

These are affective discursive practices that illustrate how the rules of emotional expression are part of the discourse that upholds certain hierarchies and practices. In these stories there is a sense of management discourse being asserted as normative (in these stories, by men) while academics (in these stories, women) push against this, succumbing, subverting and resisting at different times.

Place and space

The meeting space – the space of meeting – contains the affect and constitutes us in our roles. In the only story where there is challenge and resolution (Story 4), the narrator has to be at home before she can see what has happened and then returns to the office in an attempt to put it right. Space is relational and changeable and constituted by embedded practices (Massey, 2005). Halford (2004, p.4) speaks of the 'multiple, competing and dynamic constructions of space and place…[which] carry many and conflicting personal and cultural meanings constructed both within and beyond particular locales'. These grim tales speak of how space and place are subtly shot through with the politics of gender, of power encoded in territory and control, but also of how space gives rise to 'stories so far' (Massey, 2005), that is to the importance of space as a location for the particularity of stories in everyday institutional life. As the stories included here show, space isn't just about one's physical surroundings, it is also about meaning, and it is about how we come to matter – to ourselves, to others. The meeting rooms we discuss show the varied emotional responses to space because of the meaning they

attribute to it. It is in this sense that Lefebvre (1991) considered space to be 'lived', as a subjective experience. Space is emotive, psychological and value laden; it is much more than just a physical entity, and people's reactions to space are both coloured by other dynamics and shaped by their perception of the space itself. In other words, we see space through the lens of external factors, such as organisational politics, job security, and cultural norms – but at the same time, we see space as a reflection of ourselves, our identity, what value or respect we are held in and what control we have.

Cynicism

Although in all of these stories there is a moment of 'snap', in these short vignettes we are left to wonder what mark these meetings have left on the authors and how they will approach similar situations in the future. These meetings and the situations described within were often not first time occurrences - the stories speak of routine humiliations that have been experienced many times before in one way or another and there is a tone of cynicism that runs throughout them all. Fleming (2005) identifies cynicism as a form of resistance to 'cultural management' exemplified in stories 2, 3 and 4; the act of managers, form filling and the expectations of work being completed in a certain way so that it fits the culture of the institution, often coming before common sense and logic and certainly at the expense of employee satisfaction and happiness. Each of the four stories indicates the fabrication of academic life. In the stories of the appraisal, the feedback meetings and the job evaluation, managers perform their roles yet there are hints (for example in the banter of story 1, the initial agreement in story 3) that they do not believe in the practices they are required to adopt. Here, the appraisal meeting is conducted as required but in such a way as to act, at least in part, in opposition to purported goal of this practice, itself a tool in neoliberal responsibilization. The "performative storying […] of academic work […] is regarded with

cynicism even as it is fabricated" (Malcolm & Zukas, 2009, p. 504). The tensions and contradictions evident in the accounts of meetings in university spaces reported here exemplify the messiness of academic life. The attitude of the manager during and as reported after the meeting recounted in story 3 perhaps resulting from ill-conceived policies or sweeping edicts ('everything online') that fail to account for the complexity of the everyday. When examining the stories, the seeds of cynicism were clear; discussions and thoughts centring around institutional practices not achieving what management claim but with which the participants outwardly comply. Casey (1995) argues that cynicism can help employees to protect their 'self' from subjective colonisation to avoid the resultant psychological impact. Cynicism may also be a defence to preserve dignity and integrity when other avenues of action are not open (Hodson, 2001), it may help workers to defend a 'sense of self against a tyrannical manager' (Watson, 1994, p.194) or help them simply to avoid the emotional cost of identification (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999).

Conclusion(s)

This article has discussed how the novel and empowering collective biography methodology has helped uncover important and hitherto buried, infra-ordinary moments of women academics' experiences of the academy. The findings are grim: they draw attention to the everyday mundane moments that cohere into institutional and gendered practices and dynamics that silence women and cause cumulative harm and hurt. These previously overlooked infra-ordinary moments are the sites of 'stickiness' and 'snap', where identities are framed and reframed, impacting on how we recognise ourselves, how we are perceived, and who we might become. The site of the meeting provides a novel institutional lens through which to focus on the relational dynamics of power, gender, affect, place and space.

Meetings, as mundane spaces, our work suggests, do important work in generating a collective gendered experience which, ultimately, leads to women's disenfranchisement with the neo-liberal university. Our grim tales are invitations to readers to consider their own institutions through the lens of the damage inflicted by mundane moments. What are the gendered, raced, ableist, intersectional routinised humiliations in your institutions? What might be possible in contesting, resisting or reshaping them?

In saying this, however, we recognise that, as white women in predominantly white institutional spaces, our bodies bear privileges that othered Black and Brown bodies do not, and this privilege intersects with differences such as gender, age, dis/ability, class which resonate and are materialised differently for each of us. Ahmed (2007) suggests that whiteness is an inheritance that conditions our responses; that whiteness is lived in the materiality of the body; and that refusing to notice whiteness 'allows whiteness to be done' (Ahmed, 2007: 149 – 50). Reflecting back on the process now, perhaps one of the limitations of the collective biography we undertook was that, in attending to gender, we did not sufficiently attend to the work that whiteness was doing. One of the feminist outcomes for us, then, must be to provoke us to do the work of thinking (in our own places and spaces *now*) about how whiteness gets reproduced, sedimented and embodied. A second might be to consider how the doing of collective biography can be shaped as a methodologically capacious project to include multiply marginalized groups for whom surviving and thriving in injurious white spaces is a daily, concrete and material act.

Our hope is that, in sharing these everyday grim tales, we might open up possibilities for new modes of collective engagement, for ways of doing things differently to emerge and take hold. Telling these grim tales enables a move beyond the individual, the moment of snap

surfacing ‘as some tangible thing, as a situation that should not be patiently endured, as a situation that demands our collective impatience’ (Ahmed, 2017, p. 211). In speaking of the everyday humiliations, damages and hurts that attend our lives in neoliberal institutions, these tales do important feminist work in surfacing the injurious relations and institutional conditions that prevail. They also point to collaborative work as a means through which we might contest these conditions.

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